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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR AF
SUBJECT: LOCAL VIEWS ON THE IRANIAN CONSULATE IN JALALABAD

Classified By: PRT Director Valerie C. Fowler for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶11. (S) Since Iran re-opened its Jalalabad Consulate in March 2008, Iranian Consul Mihran Khurasanie has been active in establishing contacts with some Nangarharis, in an attempt to build Iranian influence in the mostly Pashtun region, according to local leaders and officials. While most influential Nangarhar officials, tribal leaders, and notables agree that the traditional Pashtun mistrust of Iran makes its attempts to gain influence in the province difficult, the Iranian Consul's largesse with cash and other enticements appears to be having some success. Khurasanie appears to be building a contact base by handing out cash and scholarships, hosting lavish dinners and offering all-expense-paid trips to Iran.

IRANIAN "CONSUL"

¶12. (S) The Iranians operated a consulate in Jalalabad during the first Mujahidin government until the virulently anti-Iran Taliban regime came to power. Khurasanie reportedly served as a security officer at the Jalalabad consulate before it was closed by the Taliban. Our contacts tell us they take it as common knowledge that Khurasanie is in fact an Iranian intelligence agent tasked with increasing Iran's influence among the Pashtun community.

¶13. (S) Many Pashtuns in Nangarhar were nonplussed when the Iranian Consulate in Jalalabad re-opened in early 2008, Provincial Council Chair Fazal Hadi Muslimyar told us. "There was no reason for it. There are very few shias in Nangarhar and we do not share a border with Iran." Muslimyar, as well as every other contact with whom we spoke, attributed the re-opening to lobbying by the United Front -- still often referred to among local Pashtuns as the Northern Alliance -- which worked with Iran in the 1990s against the Taliban regime. Muslimyar spoke out publicly against the re-opening of the Iranian Consulate, but feels the issue never resonated strongly enough among Pashtuns to keep it closed. "We don't necessarily hate the Iranians, and perhaps some Iranian investment would help us, but from a historical point of view, we have always been suspicious of their motives." He added that the Iranian-Taliban dispute in the 1990s was often seen locally as an Iranian-Pashtun dispute. And Iran's traditional support for the Hazara community in Afghanistan plays to historic Pashtun prejudices.

ELECTION TRACTION

¶4. (S) Iran looks to Nangarhar and sees a relatively successful and affluent province within the Pashtun belt, Jalalabad Mayor Lal Agha Kaker said. "Iran wants to expand its influence in the region by building a list of regular contacts," he told us. "They also want to help these contacts attain positions within the provincial government in upcoming elections." Iran is also trying to develop a relationship with tribes in Nangarhar, tapping into tribal ties which reach across the border into Pakistan, said Babrak Shinwari, member of Parliament and prominent member of the Shinwari tribe from Achin district. (Shinwari was a minister of Tribal Affairs under the communist regime.) Dr. Ayoub Sharafat, Nangarhar's Director for the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, also said the Iranian Consul has been active in reaching out to tribal elders in the province.

DISCREDIT THE U.S.

¶5. (S) Kurasanie is also working hard to discredit the U.S., Kaker said. Kaker and others told us that Kurasanie is spreading the word that the United States is simply trying to dominate the country and is not serious about building a sustainable Afghanistan. "He is telling people that this is the reason the U.S. is not building any long-term projects, such as hydro-electric dams, which would allow Afghanistan to stand on its own," Kaker told us. Some people in Nangarhar believe these stories, he said.

THE GREAT PASHTUN WEAKNESS

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¶6. (S) Aman Ullah Hamidzai, a naturalized U.S. citizen who returned to Jalalabad to serve as Nangarhar University Chancellor, described how he has been courted by Kurasanie. The Iranian Consul invited Hamidzai to several lavish dinners and offered scholarship packages for local students to attend classes in Iran. He has also offered funding for the university. Kurasanie has visited Nangarhar University on several occasions, trying to build relationships with students organizations. Hamidzai said he has not turned Iranian offers away, but that he is opposed to Iranian policy and would not be influenced by Kurasanie. Hamidzai describes Kurasanie's method of leverage as simple and effective: "Pashtuns can stand up against the bullets of invading armies and bring down tyrants, but they cannot resist money."

COMMENT

¶7. (S) Most of those with whom we spoke said the Iranian Consul will have a difficult job building strong and lasting influence in Nangarhar, or within the region, because of the historic Pashtun ambivalence toward Iran. But that same ambivalence has allowed Iran to re-establish a consulate in Jalalabad with little protest from the community. Nevertheless, all agreed that the Iranian Consul has made some inroads in developing contacts in the province. Haji Zalmai, District Administrator of Mohmand Dara, located near the entrance of the Khyber Pass at the Pakistani border, summed up local attitudes toward possible Iranian influence: "We don't like Iran because of our past history, but many Pashtuns here might be inclined to reconsider if they are convinced that they have something to gain from the relationship."

WOOD